

The Linguistic Work of Michael Sheehan

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Michael Sheehan (1870-1945) made valuable contributions to Irish linguistics in the first half of the twentieth century.¹ His work is not well-known, scattered as it is throughout journals in both Ireland and Australia, and in small, long out of print Irish readers. Sheehan's interest included dialectology, pedagogy and language reform. He focused his attention on the living speech of Ring, County Waterford, and his work at Ring Irish College involved him in the search for excellence in methods of language teaching. Sheehan also gave much thought to the formation of a new national literary standard of Irish and the associated questions of spelling reform and pronunciation. Readers familiar with the history and personalities of the Gaelic revival will not be surprised to learn that these activities involved Sheehan in frequent controversy, and, indeed, personal attack.

The origin of Sheehan's interest in Irish was the discovery, at a time when he was already learning Latin, Greek and French, that another living language existed on his very doorstep at Dungarvan, Co. Waterford. The teenage Sheehan therefore set about teaching himself Irish.² He entered St. Patrick's, Maynooth in the early 1890s, and continued his study of the language there during Eugene O'Growney's brief professorship. There was an increasingly enthusiastic linking of Irish language studies to Irish nationalism at Maynooth during that decade, and against that background it is striking to observe the moderate nature of Sheehan's views on the revival of Irish as expressed in a paper he read there to the St Mary's Literary Society in 1899. The context of his remarks also highlights the essentially cosmopolitan nature of Sheehan's point of view. He told the students that on a recent visit to Egypt he had met polyglot children and noticed their 'quickness of intellect and their readiness of speech, advantages, which the educated speakers of more languages than one always enjoy'.³ In Egypt, Sheehan 'became con-

For biographical information on Sheehan (Micheál Ó Siocháin) see Diarmuid Breathnach and M. Ní Mhurchú, *Beathaisnéis a Trí* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1992), 136-138.

² U. Breathnach, 'An tArdeaspag Micheál Ó Siocháin', *An Linn Bhú: Iris Ghaeltacht na nDéise*, 1 (1997), 36.

³ Michael Sheehan, 'Leaves from my Egyptian Diary', *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 4th series, 8 (1900), 12.

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vinced of the enormous educational advantage of getting our own people to talk their own language again, in addition to English'. At that stage, then, Sheehan accepted that English would remain, even prevail, and the motive for using Irish at all was primarily the same as for other language studies, to practice the 'expression of the same ideas in different ways'. A hint of the direction in which his opinion was to move in the next few years is found in the remainder of that last quotation: '... a conviction made all the firmer some months later when I witnessed the enthusiasm of German scholars for the distant past of our race'.⁴ It is clear from this that Sheehan was beginning to see Irish, with its particular cultural heritage, as not merely an option but a necessity.

In 1902 Sheehan began serious collecting of linguistic data during three summertime visits to Ring, a sample of which he published in 1906 as *Sean-Chaint na nDéise: The Idiom of Living Irish*.⁵ The importance of 'idiom' and 'living' in that title cannot be overestimated. They are found again in the preface to that work: 'In the spirit of reverence, with which I always approach the living speech of the people, I have refrained from touching the winged word with desecrating hand, and have set down, as far as was consistent with my personal limitations, every expression in the precise form in which it passed the speaker's lips'.⁶ He refers in the same place to the 'almost Tacitean elusiveness of the Irish turn of expression'. At face value, that preface seems to announce a strictly descriptive approach but in fact the body of the work contains frequent prescriptive interventions by the author. Clearly, *Sean-Chaint na nDéise* was intended not only for perusal by dialectologists but also, and perhaps mainly, for the increasingly numerous language learners who came to Ring each summer.

Sheehan was in that same year, 1906, a co-founder of Ring Irish College and the particular problems of effective language teaching were his ongoing concern. It was this activity that led him to produce half a dozen Irish readers consisting of material such as dialogues, anecdotes and stories collected from or elaborated with local native speakers, and his own newly composed tales in traditional style. They deserve a study in their own right from the literary point of view but I consider them here as part of Sheehan's linguistic work.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sheehan's preface to the first edition is reprinted in the second edition published in 1944 by the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (pp v-vi), referred to henceforth as SCD.

⁶ Ibid., v.

These Irish readers differ from *Sean-Chaint na nDéise*. In the earliest, *Cnó Coilleadh Craobhaighe: The Irish of the People*, Sheehan wrote that as 'almost all the peculiarities of grammar and pronunciation' in the local speech were recorded in his previous book, he felt himself 'at liberty to return to the literary standard of grammar and spelling'.⁷ Thus, having noted the Ring pronunciation *dh'eirig* (yire'ig) in SCD, the form *d'eirig* is used in CCC.⁸ There are, nevertheless, frequent insertions of alternate forms in the reader: *B'uil* in the text, for example, is immediately followed by the more generally recognised *an bhfuil* in parenthesis.⁹

Sheehan's first reader came out in a school edition in 1908 with this endorsement on the cover: 'Sanctioned by the Commissioners for use in National Schools'. The Cork writer Peter O'Leary took exception to Sheehan's Irish and to the adoption of his texts by the schools, and belittled them in a series of pamphlets published between 1907 and 1912.¹⁰ This is the unpleasant background to Sheehan's dignified defence of his work in the preface to *Gile na mBláth* in 1912. He was not at all combative and indeed it was only at 'the earnest recommendation' of his publishers Messrs. Gill and Son that he included in that preface two of the many letters of support he had received from Irish scholars.¹¹ The letter from Dr Richard Henebry is characteristically hyperbolic and problematic, stating that Sheehan's books use 'the correct orthographical form common to all the Irish that ever went before them'.¹² The other letter from Osborn Bergin, after praising Sheehan's 'feeling for idiom', expressed a preference for the spellings used in SCD, showing 'the language as it really is', rather than the 'archaic' or 'semi-archaic' forms of his readers.¹³

Sheehan courteously disagreed, and added that, in his opinion, only a 'simplified spelling uniform for all districts' would solve the problem.¹⁴ The probable misunderstanding here had been pointed out by the late Dr Risteard Breathnach: Bergin was thinking of a simplified spelling for each dialect but Sheehan seems to have taken his

⁷ Michael Sheehan, *Cnó Coilleadh Craobhaighe: The Irish of the People* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1908). I quote from the 1908 school edition but internal evidence shows that the preface is that of 1907, hereafter referred to as CCC.

⁸ Compare SCD, 138 and 153 with CCC 49.

⁹ CCC 2.

¹⁰ For Peter O'Leary (Peadar Ó Laoghaire) see Diamuid Breathnach and M. Ní Mhurchú, *Beathaisnéis a Dó* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1990) 118-120.

¹¹ Michael Sheehan, *Gile na mBláth* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1912), v.

¹² *Ibid.*, vii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, vi.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vii and viii.

comments as a proposed method for creating a national literary standard.¹⁵

Sheehan's Irish readers included observations on points of Irish grammar and they too attracted not only criticism but negative allusions of a personal nature from Gerard O'Nolan, Professor of Irish at Maynooth from 1909 to 1940, and the author of the much praised *Studies in Modern Irish* I-IV (1919-1922).¹⁶ In Part 1 of that work, O'Nolan launched into a diatribe against 'the distinction between the logical and the grammatical Predicate in connection with the verb *is*', calling it 'a great deal of nonsense'.¹⁷ O'Nolan continued with an extraordinary statement which cast aspersions on the linguistic ability of proponents of that distinction: 'to say that the predicate with *is* in any sentence is really the logical subject lays one open to the suspicion of not understanding Irish speech at all'. The allusion is, of course, to Sheehan and his discussions of the question in *Gile na mBláth* and *Árthach an Óir*.¹⁸ O'Nolan returned to the attack on page 44 of the same text: 'In regard to "the rule requiring a definite noun to be separated from *is* by a personal pronoun", it is time to remark that there IS NO SUCH RULE AT ALL! (sic)'.¹⁹ O'Nolan's use of capital letters and the exclamation mark is quite hysterical and worlds away from the 'diplomatic etiquette' suggested by Sheehan.²⁰

One wonders why O'Nolan displayed such animosity towards Sheehan rather than pursuing an open discussion, *ad rem*, with clear footnotes referring to the author and publications in question. The fact that both men were colleagues, residing in the same seminary and teaching the same body of students, is not so much an explanation as a complication.

Sheehan, as it happened, had the last word. O'Nolan died in 1942 while Sheehan, who had returned from Australia in 1937, was putting the finishing touches to the second edition of SCD. On pages 211-215 of the new edition Sheehan added a new discussion of *is*-sentences, which provides much food for thought. One of the most

¹⁵ R. Breathnach, 'An Dochtúir Mícheál Ó Síocháin', *Léachtaí Cholm Cille*, 23 (1993), 133-134.

¹⁶ For biographical information on O'Nolan (Gearóid Ó Nualláin) see Breathnach and Ní Mhurchú, *Beathaisnéis a Dó*, 128-131.

¹⁷ G. O'Nolan, *Studies in Modern Irish Part 1* (Dublin: The Educational Company of Ireland, 1919), 2.

¹⁸ Sheehan, *Gile na mBláth* 86-87 and *Árthach an Óir* (Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1911), 112-113.

¹⁹ O'Nolan, *Studies in Modern Irish*, 44.

²⁰ 'May I venture to express the wish that those who engage in controversy on matters of Irish scholarship would endeavour strictly to observe in their writings the convenient rules of diplomatic etiquette?' (*Gile na mBláth*, v).

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important facts to emerge is not that Sheehan stood by his earlier work on these matters but that he had, in a truly unprejudiced search for truth, given his critics the benefit of the doubt, returned to the field and appealed to the language of native speakers. His account of the discovery that his revised methodology was faulty, and subsequent confirmation of his original findings is most instructive. O'Nolan is not named but Sheehan's inclusion of 'a lengthy list of *is*-sentences – incomplete, by the way', is clear enough.²¹ Sheehan continued to disagree with O'Nolan's analysis of the sentences but, more importantly, was concerned that such analysis, in class time, 'had the effect of destroying the pupils' interest in the language'. Sheehan proposed instead that teachers say simply that the 'emphatic part of the sentence' immediately follows *is* and give no more than five types of such sentences.²² Finally, in correcting two sentences of religious content given by O'Nolan, Sheehan refers to his critic merely as 'the author of one of our books on grammar'.²³

Clearly, O'Nolan was on the opposite side to Sheehan in the language controversy: an unashamed partisan of O'Leary, his *Studies in Modern Irish* refers to seventeen works by that author and ignores or denigrates those of Sheehan. The bad feeling between the two may also be connected to the fact that O'Nolan accepted the appointment as Professor of Irish at Maynooth while the former professor, Michael O'Hickey, a 'very dear personal friend' of Sheehan,²⁴ was in the process of appealing against his notorious dismissal.

In 1923, shortly after arriving in Australia, Sheehan contributed a comment on 'Some Thoughts on an Irish Literary Language' by Gustave Lehmacher to the journal *Studies*.²⁵ Sheehan's article is, despite its brevity, characteristically luxuriant in its richness of ideas, choice diction, literary allusions and in its intermingling of linguistic, cultural and spiritual themes. I attempt here to extract the linguistic element. Lehmacher suggested that the dialect of Aran should provide the basis of a new literary standard of Irish. Sheehan disagreed on practical grounds but, more importantly, he saw the whole question of dialect and literary language in a different light. 'Irish survives in dialects,' he wrote, 'and the dialects are all in danger of perishing; every one of them holds ... linguistic treasure which we

²¹ SCD 212.

²² Ibid., 211-212.

²³ Ibid., 214; cf O'Nolan, op. cit., 47 note 1.

²⁴ Gregory Byrnes, 'Dr Michael Sheehan in Australia, 1922-1937' in Philip Bull, C. McConville and N. McLachlan (eds), *Irish-Australian Studies* (Melbourne: La Trobe University, 1991), 19.

²⁵ *Studies*, March 1923, 32-34.

cannot afford to lose; every one of them, and every scrap of every one of them, must be saved'.²⁶ How then could a standard literary language emerge from such variety? Sheehan pointed to the distinction between phonetics and orthography: 'I am not in complete agreement with Father Lehmacher on the divergence of the dialects: to the ear, no doubt, they differ widely, but not to the eye. Anyone who is deep in his own dialect has no difficulty, or very little, in reading matter produced in other dialects, provided it follow the ordinary, not the phonetic, spelling'.

Sheehan's thoughts on bilingualism seem to represent a *volte-face* when compared to those he expressed in 1899. Then he noted the educational advantages of learning more than one language: here, he wrote that 'bilingualism which would make all our people speakers of English and Irish will infallibly lead to the destruction of the native language'. The contradiction, however, is merely apparent: the polyglot children that Sheehan observed in Egypt were learning French and German, languages with millions of speakers and a literary tradition in print; in Ireland, a small population speaking dialects without a literary standard in print was being absorbed by a neighbouring world language. 'A permanent bilingual population,' he wrote, 'is possible only when it is wedged in between two great unilingual areas'.²⁷ Nevertheless, he hoped that with great effort, the situation might be reversed: 'My ideal for the *near* future is to see Ireland as Irish-speaking as it is now English-speaking, with all the dialects flourishing, and all so widely known that intercourse between speakers even from widely separated districts would present no difficulty'.²⁸ The Gaelic utopia envisaged by Sheehan has not materialised but it is a fact that developments in sound recording and telecommunications (especially *Raidió na Gaeltachta*) have assisted speakers and learners of Irish to become familiar with different varieties of the language. Sheehan visited Ireland in 1933 and spent some time in Ring revising SCD. Four years later he returned to Ireland permanently and after further work with friends and colleagues the second edition of SCD appeared in 1944.

Sheehan also worked on an Irish translation of his 1938 text *A Simple Course of Religion*. It provides an interesting example of his attempt to put his linguistic ideas into practice. The project was more complicated than it might have been because, due to failing health, Sheehan was reduced to an editorial role while Mícheál Ó Cionn-

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

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fhaolaidh and five other collaborators did the bulk of the work. The preface states that Sheehan had hoped that appropriate versions of the book would also be made available to young people in Connacht and Ulster,²⁹ which shows that he and his colleagues intended their translation to approximate an ideal pan-Munster form of Irish. The hoped-for Connacht and Ulster versions, would, presumably, not differ greatly in spelling but it would employ turns of phrase and vocabulary more familiar to the populations of those provinces.

In assessing Sheehan's linguistic work, and its relevance to Irish today, it may be helpful to consider this statement by Joseph Sheils and Diarmuid Ó Sé: 'A new written standard form of the language was adopted in the late 1940s ...; it is based on the spoken dialects and therefore not at all literary or archaic. The pronunciation of Irish varies between the provinces and there is no generally accepted spoken standard.'³⁰

Sheehan died in 1945. It was known that a vast amount of linguistic material gathered by him remained unpublished in his notebooks. It was finally made available by the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies in 1961, edited by Risteard B. Breathnach. The editor there paid tribute to Sheehan for his great service to Irish learning and culture in collecting and preserving so much of the Irish spoken in the Déise country earlier this century.³¹

²⁹ M. Ó Síocháin and M. Ó Cionnfhaolaidh, *Cúrsa Simplidhe sa Chreideamh* (Dublin: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1950), vii.

³⁰ D. Ó Sé, J. Sheils, *Teach yourself Irish* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993).

³¹ R. B. Breathnach, *Seana-Chaint na nDéise II* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1984), vii-viii. See also Breathnach, 'An Dochtúir Micheál Ó Síocháin', *passim*.